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ECOFEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE POLITICS OF MONEY

Mary Mellor

Ecofeminism, as its name implies, brings together the insights of feminism and ecology.¹ Feminism is concerned with the way in which women in general have been subordinated to men in general. Ecologists are concerned that human activity is destroying the viability of ecosystems. Ecofeminist political economy argues that the two are linked. This linkage is not seen as stemming from some essentialist female identification with nature, for which some early ecofeminists were criticised, but from women's position in society, particularly in relation to masculine-dominated economic systems.² What ecofeminist political economy explores is the gendering of economic systems. It sees a material link between the externalisation and exploitation of women and the externalisation and exploitation of nature.³ For ecofeminist political economy, 'the economy' is a bounded system that excludes or marginalises many aspects of human existence and of nonhuman nature. This problem of externalisation is one explored by many green and feminist economists, but finding a solution is more problematic.

One solution is to incorporate 'externalised' aspects of human existence within the market form, but this is not a solution if the market itself is seen as the source of the problem. A more radical approach seeks to expand the notion of the economy from the narrow neoclassical focus on market determination and rational choice or the productivist focus of left economists, to a much wider conception of human activities in meeting needs. More expansive concepts have been adopted by feminist economists such

as 'provisioning' which cover all aspects of human needs including nurturing and emotional support – much of which still remains in the home and the community.⁴ Another approach is to try to withdraw from the market or make it more locally responsive.⁵ For some this means dropping out of the money-based market economy entirely and moving towards subsistence as a means of production.⁶ Another approach is to look for transformative spaces within current economic structures.⁷ This is reflected in the considerable enthusiasm for alternative economic forms such as LETS, time banks, or other mutual or cooperative structures.⁸

However, as well as exploring radical and innovative alternatives, it is also necessary to challenge the capitalist market as a structure. Through violence, patriarchy, nepotism, colonialism, and market manipulation, the capitalist economy has gained control of the sources of sustenance for many of the world's people as well as other species.⁹ As Michael Perelman argues, 'virtually no land ownership in the world has either honest or honourable origins'.¹⁰ This chapter will argue that control of banking and finance has also been central to capitalist accumulation and growth. What has made the situation much more complex is that through the market, the capitalist economy has intertwined the servicing of human needs (where profitable) with the creation and meeting of wants.

So how can the capitalist market be challenged in a way that provides a feasible alternative at a systemic level? As the exploration of externalities shows, the market system places a boundary around certain limited activities and functions that are defined by their value in money terms. Ecofeminist political economy points to the dualist construction of the modern market economy and the way in which economic valuing and the social dominance of men are directly connected. This chapter will explore first the basis of that dualism and then explore the critical question of money issue and circulation that has largely been ignored by both radical and conventional economists.

Dualist economics

Orthodox economics is a theory written by men about men, one that pushes women to the economic margins by ignoring women's

work and women's issues.¹¹ This leads to a dualism in economic thought in which 'the economy' is carved out of the complexity of the whole of human and non-human existence.

The Economy and its Other

<i>Accorded High Value</i>	<i>Accorded Low/No Value</i>
Economic 'Man'	Women's work
Market value	Subsistence
Personal wealth	Social reciprocity
Labour/Intellect	Body, emotions
Skills/Tradeable Knowledge	Feelings, wisdom
Able-bodied workers	Sick, needy, old, young
Exploitable resources	Eco-systems, wild nature
Unlimited consumption	Sufficiency

The money-valued economy takes only what it needs from nature and human life to fuel its activities and only provides products and services that are profitable. This has led Susan Donath to argue that instead of mainstream economics with its 'single story' of competitive production and market exchange, there needs to be a 'distinctively feminist economics' based on the 'other economy' representing care, reciprocity, the direct production and maintenance of human beings.¹² As the pioneering work of Hilikka Pietila and Marilyn Waring has demonstrated, what is unvalued or undervalued by the economy is the resilience of the ecosystem, the unpaid and unrecognised domestic work of women and social reciprocity, particularly as represented in non-market economies.¹³

Ecofeminists see the capitalist market as a small part of a much greater sustaining whole. Maria Mies sees it as the tip of an iceberg with, below the water line, the invisible economy that includes the world of unpaid work and subsistence and natural resources.¹⁴ For Hazel Henderson, the market sector is the icing on a multi-layered cake.¹⁵ Beneath the icing lies the public sector, the non-market sector and 'Mother Nature' so called. The filling

of the cake is the informal 'cash' economy', which, in practice, forms a large part of the world's money-based economies.

Women's position in relation to the money-valued economy is complex. Women can be present in the economy in large numbers as consumers and employees. There are women who do well economically, and some women exploit and oppress other women and the environment. What ecofeminist political economy focuses upon is not women per se, but 'women's work', the range of human activities that have historically been associated with women both inside and outside of the market place. Women's work is the basic work around the human body that makes other forms of activity possible. It secures the body and the community. If a woman enters the valued sphere of economic life she must leave her woman-work behind; childcare, domestic work, responsibility for elderly relatives, subsistence work, community activities. The valued economy is therefore limited and partial in relation to the whole of women's lives.¹⁶

From the perspective of ecofeminist political economy, the market economy and its public sector support system, represents a public world as defined by dominant men, a masculine-experience economy, a ME economy that has cut itself free from the ecological and social framework of human *being* in its widest sense. Its ideal is 'economic man', who may also be female. Economic man is fit, mobile, able-bodied, unencumbered by domestic or other responsibilities. The goods he consumes appear to him as finished products or services and disappear from his view on disposal or dismissal. He has no responsibility for the life-cycle of those goods or services any more than he questions the source of the air he breathes or the disposal of his excreta. The ME economy is disembodied because the life-cycle and daily cycle of the body cannot be accommodated in the fractured world of the money-valued economy. The ME economy is also disembedded from its ecosystem; it is not limited by local growing seasons and where possible dumps its waste on poor, marginalised communities.¹⁷ 'Economic man' is the product of an ahistoric, atomised approach to the understanding of human existence.¹⁸

Ecofeminist political economy expands on earlier criticisms of the disembedding of the economy from society, emphasising in particular the dimensions of space and time. Women's work is spatially embedded because it is, of necessity, local and communal, centred on the home. Those doing domestic duties, reflecting bodily needs, cannot move far from those responsibilities. In subsistence economies women's work, and subsistence work generally, is embedded in the local ecosystem. In contrast to its spatial limitations, women's work is unlimited in terms of time characterised by repetition and presence: watching, waiting, nursing, cooking, cleaning, fetching and carrying, weeding. Much of women's work involves being available, always on call, so much so, that many women take paid work as a break from the demands of domestic life.¹⁹ For many, this is a labour of love, but it can also be seen as an imposed altruism.²⁰ While women's work may be carried out as an expression of love and/or duty, for many there is fear of violence and/or lack of any other economic options. In their historical association with the life and needs of the human body, women have been seen as weak, emotional, irrational, even dangerous and subjected to domestic violence.²¹

The core argument of ecofeminist political economy is that the marginalisation of women's work is ecologically dangerous because women's lives as reflected in domestic and caring work represent the embodiedness of humanity, the link of humanity with its natural being. Women's work represents the fundamental reality of human existence, the body's life in *biological time* the time it takes to rest, recover, grow up and grow old. Equally there is a time-scale for the environmental framing of human activities. *Ecological time* is the time it takes to restore the effects of human activity, the time-cycle of renewal and replenishment within the ecosystem. As formal economic systems have been constructed, women's work has become the repository of the inconvenience of human existence. Moreover, the pattern of exclusion that affects women's work is, in turn, related to other exploitations, exclusions, and marginalisations. The valued economy has gained its power and ascendancy through the marginalisation and exploitation of